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Streets and Open Spaces in Seoul (1995–2010): A Cultural and Geographical View of Local Neighborhoods*

Valérie GELÉZEAU

Introduction

The transformation of Seoul's cityscape and urban morphology since the 1970s has been the topic of a tremendous body of research in various fields of the social sciences interested in the construction of landscape. Based upon the perspective of cultural geography, this chapter proposes a particular focus on what is generally considered as "open space," grounded on a two-fold entry: first, the analysis is centered on a particular urban object, the street, one of the matrix of urban tissue; second, the analysis is oriented more specifically on the scale of neighborhood communities in residential areas.

In addition to new trends of analysis, several factual circumstances have changed for the streets in Seoul since the mid-1990s. The traffic conditions, for example, have actually improved in Seoul,

* This chapter is based on an article that was originally published in the *Korea Journal*, vol. 37 no. 2 (summer 1997), in 1997, under the title "The Street in Seoul: In Search of the Soul of Seoul." This expanded version adds recent research in social and cultural geography about streets (Coblence, Couderc, and Eizykman 1998; Fleury 2004; Goudon 2002; Paquot 2009) and, more generally, the public space about which a wide array of geographical literature is available, in English, French, and Korean. The major work on civic space by the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas has indeed deeply influenced research about public space in many disciplines of the social sciences and particularly those that make space as one of their primary objects of analysis (geography, architecture, and urbanism). Works by D. Mitchell (2003) in English, by C. Ghorra-Gobin (2001a, 2001b), F. Tomas (2001), J.-Y. Toussaint & M. Zimmerman (2001) in French, by Cho Myungrae (2002, 2008a, 2008b, 2013) in Korean are indicative of that development.

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due to sustained policies to develop both major road networks and public transportation—subway, bus lines, and taxis. Indeed, since the early 2000s, the average intra-city speed kept increasing: about 20 km per hour on average, which is faster than in Paris, where cars drive at an average speed of 16 km per hour (Gelézeau 2011). Also, since 2007, Seoul City has gradually introduced street names and numbers, changing the traditional address system.

Finally, at the city level, there has been a tremendous transformation in the shape of public spaces in Seoul since the early 2010s, with the creation of new public spaces and the re-opening of previously existing structures. The major projects, which were undertaken in the historical center of Seoul under the Urban Renaissance Master Plan (SDI 2000) that allowed the construction of the Cheonggyecheon Promenade and the reshaping of great squares (City Hall and Gwanghwamun Plaza), are emblematic of a movement that is not restricted to Seoul and characterizes many great metropolis of the contemporary world, especially in so-called emerging or intermediate countries (Houssay-Holzschuch et al. 2007).

Along with the creation and transformation of greater public spaces, open spaces and public spaces were also deeply transformed on the local scale. This chapter also tries to capture this transformation, linked to the construction of the “Apartment Republic” (*apateu gonghwaguk*) (Gelézeau 2007), based on a collection of photographs taken by the author between the mid-1990s and 2010.

“The Street in Seoul” in the Mid-1990s: A View on “Hybrid Spaces” from Cultural Geography

The street is seldom the specific object of study in urban geography. Considered as part of a more complex whole—the city—it usually recedes into the background. Nevertheless, the street is a fundamental element in the organization of urban space, in both a morphological and a cultural sense: the street network, which ensures such vital functions as traffic, also defines the structure of urban

space, reflecting on a given culture.¹

Approaching the topic of “the street in Seoul” from the point of view of cultural geography leads us to pay particular attention to the streetscapes and to the activities taking place in the street, as they are direct expressions of the Korean milieu.² The demographic and economic importance of Seoul, which is rivaled by no other city or town in Korea, does not make the undertaking easy: might not the vigorous personality of Korean culture be obscured in such a wide-spreading metropolis, exposed more than any other city in the country to an internationally standardized, urban way of life?

Let us not merely trust appearances: even though the capital of South Korea is similar in many respects to other large cities, its Korean identity is strong, as the streetscapes and varieties of urban behavior can attest.

In a city, there is a natural hierarchy of streets, which constitute the transportation network and resemble the arteries in a body. But in Seoul, due to peculiarities of site and history, these organic networks did not have a chance to develop; instead, very different levels of the hierarchy were brought into abrupt contact, forming truly “hybrid” spaces.

These notions of “hybrid spaces” and “hybridation” in architecture and urban forms have been explained by Christelle Robin, Shin Yong-Hak, and Bernard Jeannel.³ The “hybrid spaces” are the result of the transformation of vernacular forms, due to the introduction of new elements—technical innovations, or foreign models, for example. According to these authors, the street network in Seoul is considered a good example of hybrid spaces.

Seoul’s Site: Simultaneous Restraint and Cultural Referent

The topography of Seoul is comparatively rough and rather unpropitious for a spreading metropolis. Like the rest of the country, which is mountainous and whose surface is only 16 percent plains, the cityscape is marked by hills.

The initial site of Seoul is a small plain located about four kilometers north of the Hangang river and surrounded by mountains—

four granitic backbones whose average height is 150 meters—with Mt. Bugaksan on the north, Mt. Namsan on the south, Mt. Inwangsan on the west, and Mt. Naksan on the east. Even though the city began to expand beyond these natural protections only in the 1920s, it now spreads out much beyond its initial mountain borders. To the south, the city is expanding onto the left bank of the Hangang river. The notion of plain is therefore quite relative. The mountains are not very high, but they still dominate the landscape.

The lay of the land thus creates a radical distinction between the wide thoroughfares of the city, which avoid the steepest hills, and the small streets climbing up these hills that constitute a significant part of the city's street network. This dichotomy is not determined only by the obvious necessity of adapting roads to topography. It is the precise expression of a distinction in practice between roads which are considered fit for traffic and roads which are dead letters in urban dynamics. This distinction is understandable only in the context of geomancy. Geomancy (*pungsu* 風水) is a group of rules which traditionally played an important part in the process of choosing where to settle a tomb, a house, or a city; it is still a common method of organizing and analyzing the Korean milieu.⁴ As a matter of fact, Seoul's site conforms very closely to the precepts of geomancy. It is surrounded by mountains and has easy access to water, two of the major criteria for an auspicious city location. Furthermore, the structure of the city itself incorporates a spatial organization that is strongly symbolic in *pungsu*. According to the rules of this vernacular knowledge, Seoul's palace was constructed in the north, facing south, at the foot of Bugaksan. The main thoroughfares originated from the palace and led towards the provinces. These roads allowed the royal officers to carry governmental orders from Seoul to the provinces and take back information and tax revenues.⁵ Therefore, the peripheral position of the palaces controlled the development of the street network: from the very beginning, the structure of this network was completely different from structures based on the notion of centrality as it is conceived in traditional Occidental cities, where the streets radiate from the public

square (the Greek *agora*; the Roman *forum*). In Seoul, the original structure of the street network, although expressing a centralized power (the royal capital ruling over the provinces), did not present a radio-concentric shape because its construction followed geomantic rules.

The rules of geomancy distinguish between different types of streets, depending on their situation and function: the layout of processional roads is thus carefully studied, while the rest of the network, which ensures access to the residences, develops itself spontaneously.

The persistent tension between the large boulevards and the narrow alleys, exacerbated by the constant pressures towards urbanization in the Central Business District (CBD), reflects a deeper tension between a sumptuary and processional logic, and the logic of concealment, concerned with access to private space.

The Genesis of the Network: Breaks and Superpositions

The corollary of a demographic stasis,⁶ the spatial organization of the city did not undergo any major alterations from the late fourteenth century—when Seoul was consecrated as the capital of the Joseon dynasty in 1394—to the beginning of the Japanese occupation in 1910.

The initial network was characterized by a gridiron, in which the main thoroughfares cross orthogonally in north-south and east-west directions, and which corresponds to the present boulevards of Jongno, Euljiro, and Taepyeongno. Although this plan is basically checkered, it is quite difficult to associate it with the gridiron characterizing traditional Chinese cities—and especially the capital of the Han dynasty, Changan 長安. If some similarities between the Chinese city and Seoul, such as the fortifications, the main gates, and the palaces can be detected, they are not to be found in the layout of streets. As to the street network, the Chinese model has been modified by the addition of local elements, such as the curved shape of one important axis (see fig. 1) or the maze of secondary arteries.

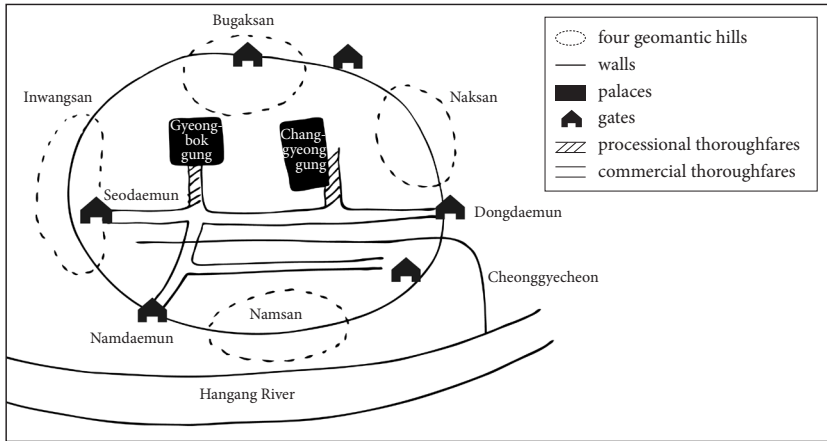


Figure 1. Structure of the 1394 walled city.

Source: W. Kim (1981, 3-10); K. Lee (1977, 79-82).

Note:

1. The palaces face south.
 2. The processional arteries are oriented towards the south also.
 3. The north-south oriented commercial thoroughfare leading to Namdaemun is curved.
- Hanyang's layout does not totally conform to the Chinese model of a perfectly checkered plan.

Roads providing access to the houses branch chaotically, forming a convoluted maze of frequent dead-ends, all highlighting the essentially pedestrian nature of this network. Indeed, the wheel was not used very much in Hanyang,⁷ which should hardly be a surprise since Far East civilizations used to give deference to the pedestrian.⁸

Until the early twentieth century, Seoul remained largely unchanged, a royal city dominated by the aristocrats of the Joseon dynasty, whose interest was to maintain a structure of space that preserved their cultural preeminence in the city. In 1910, the urban network underwent its first alterations, applied by the Japanese to a now-colonial city.⁹ They undertook a policy of large public works, widening the main thoroughfares and building new roads; this policy was termed “the ordering of streets,” a revealing expression that highlights their essential motivation: to promote military as well as economic and social control over the Korean capital. Japa-

nese policy followed principles that totally diverged from those which had governed the city's original construction. Operating under standards of efficiency intended for a colonial and military city, this policy did not take into consideration a real need for infrastructures and set little value on the identity of the capital. Many of the roads built by the Japanese seem to have been built before urban development made them actually necessary. The building of contemporary Seoul is therefore based on the Japanese imprint.

After the Korean War, during which Seoul was destroyed and a large part of its population lost, reconstruction of the city took place without real planning. Millions of refugees and former inhabitants necessitated emergency housing. Thus, the organization of land inherited from former times remained the framework of space, especially since financial hardship precluded any type of reorganization. The distinction between the large colonial boulevards and Hanyang's labyrinth or maze formation therefore continued in the reconstruction.

In the early 1960s, a true explosion of urban spread began, against the background of Korea's economic "miracle on the Han-gang river" and exponential demographic growth.¹⁰ The consequence of this extremely rapid evolution was a lack of control in urban planning. The expectations and plans of the authorities were out-of-date as soon as they were published. Yet ten-year urban plans¹¹ were put into place, in which municipality plans were reduced to a couple of large-scale public works designed to relieve urban congestion. These works, which had to provide infrastructures for this spontaneous development, could only be executed the "hard way": by expropriating land and destroying housing, at the expense of quality. Because the traffic problems were the most intense, the projects that were carried out consisted of widening the boulevards already reshaped by the Japanese in the center of the city: Jongno, Sejongno, Euljiro, Taepyeongno, and Chungmuro.¹²

Seoul's development after the war thus responded to an imperious urge which subordinated the cultural to the functional. But if all the works accomplished since the Japanese occupation are

characterized by the superimposition of modern infrastructures upon the traditional organization of land, that traditional organization nonetheless still defines the urban environment in many areas of Seoul, particularly in the hills. Seoul's alleys did not disappear, leading us to wonder now to what extent they are indispensable to the very soul of Seoul. The municipality no longer tries to destroy them. The problem is that Seoul is now a metropolis, and must accommodate the heavy demands of urban traffic.

The Hybrid Spaces and the Metropolis

First, the traffic network is characterized by a clear quantitative deficiency, since only 17 percent of Seoul's surface area is covered by roads, which is relatively low for such a wide-spreading metropolis. The municipality has been conscious of this problem for some time and plans to increase the percentage to over 25 percent, but even this will not be enough for any effective solutions to emerge: the urban space is so saturated now in the historical center of the city that any work undertaken would entail a destruction of cultural landmarks similar to the ones that took place in the 1960s and 1970s.

This quantitative deficiency in the network reveals a qualitative problem as well, the result of the alley-like streets or lanes leading to and off large boulevards. These large boulevards (*gwangno* or *daero*)¹³ represent 40 to 50 percent of the circulating surface of Seoul, while the smaller roads (*soro*) occupy a mere 20 percent of it. Many of these small streets are below 12 meters wide and unpaved, so narrow that they are not practical for car traffic.

Lastly, the general structure of the network, in which the central gridiron and the radio-centric shape of the roads built more recently to give access to the CBD, is another contributing factor to urban congestion. Indeed, the business district, located in the original basin, is surrounded by residential areas. The deficiency of circulating infrastructures and the hyperconcentration of activities in the center of the city lead daily commuters to flood the transportation network, particularly during rush hours.

Traffic problems in Seoul are thus quite serious, especially since

car registrations, which saw a huge rise in the early 1970s, have been on the increase ever since.¹⁴ Indeed, the car is at the very heart of the problem, for cars appeared very late on the Seoul landscape. Seoul had remained essentially a pedestrian city until the late 1950s (G. Lee 1989, 19-26; 1987, 134-136). The separation between pedestrian space and automobile space manifest in Western cities by sidewalks and pedestrian crossings has no traditional counterpart in the Korean street. Today, there is no alternative but to conclude that sidewalks and pedestrian crossings, which are now part of the landscape, are the consequences of the boulevards. But many *soro* preserve their face of yesterday: sinuous alleys, without sidewalks, and with an undifferentiated circulating space.

There is no doubt that hybrid spaces adjust to any metropolis, but in Seoul, they embody elements that make the city very different from other large metropolises, such as Paris or New York. Unlike these other cities, Seoul had never really used forms of transportation which required a special space which might later accommodate the automobile. Rather, in Korea, as an inevitable result of the modernization of the street, along with an elevation of living standards, the widespread use of the automobile entered a milieu which had no history of traditional vehicular transportation forms. In the Korean ethos, walking has always had a special place. The Joseon dynasty used to send its provincial students to Seoul in order to take the public service examinations, giving them only several pairs of plaited straw sandals which they changed every twenty or thirty kilometers. As well as being a sign of modernization, the automobile has altered the Korean milieu and is endangering its identity.

Street and Milieu Identity through Cityscape in the 1990s

Streets in the Process of Acculturation?

The acculturation of the urban landscape—that is, its alteration under the effect of foreign cultures—is obvious on the large bou-

levards in the center of the city. Indeed, the *ro* (sometimes denoted as “*no*”)¹⁵ can hardly be distinguished from large thoroughfares in Western cities, particularly from some cities on the west coast in the United States. As a matter of fact, many of the elements of the Korean cityscape are the products of acculturation from the North-American urban landscape, which entered Korea via Japan after the war. Some of these elements, such as shop signs or even commercial activities, are very similar. Tokyo’s Ginza and the commercial areas of Gangnam, like Apgujeong-dong, are examples of such similarities. Additionally, in Gangnam, the street network is totally Americanized, with its checkered plan and its wide boulevards designed for automobile traffic.

The urban culture of the United States is characterized by the prominent part the automobile plays in the organization of space, among other things. When such a model spreads to a city like Seoul, the milieu will undergo radical alterations. Not only the landscape itself, but the very nature of the city.

That is why the mixture of street types is so amazing in some parts of the city center. Boulevards, which reveal only a hint of the Korean identity, sometimes open onto pedestrian alleys that have escaped renovations and are relics of other times. The *ro/no* are the places where the character of Seoul as a metropolis expresses itself best—and in some respects, this metropolis is aggressive in its development of landscapes and its way of life. A large street in Seoul is far from offering the harmonious perspective of Haussmann’s Parisian avenue. The vanishing lines here are broken by the diversity of the building shapes, as well as the overpasses and road signs which are hung above the roadway. In addition to the diversity of shape, a wide array of colors can be seen: the official standards prescribed by the municipality¹⁶ are not much respected. On the shopping boulevards, the storefronts are often covered by placards and advertising that light up at night in streams of neon. Just as the colors abound, so does urban life: the crowded sidewalks and the congested streets create stress for the passers-by. Walking around becomes positively dangerous when the monsoon season comes,

bringing with it a sea of umbrellas which create the risk of getting one's eye put out. Urban life and behavior can be extremely hard in Seoul, especially on the boulevards.

Not all the streets of Seoul are similar to the largest *ro/no*, but for many of them, the acculturation of their landscape appears clearly on the placards which, in some areas in the process of rapid modernization, are written in the Roman alphabet. Modernization is thus accompanied with an assimilation of elements that are totally extraneous to the Korean milieu. Is a street in Seoul, where the *hangeul* and the *hanja*¹⁷ are disappearing little by little, conquered by the Roman alphabet and alien names, still a Korean street? Or, is it a street of the metropolis, belonging now to standardization as a way of life, and whose identity is lost with its vanquished language? In Seoul, the names of modernity are alien names, written in the Roman alphabet, and seemingly used as advertisements: naming a coffee shop "La vie en rose" or "Bodyguard" is a fashionable sign of distinction and thus acts as a marketing strategy.

Mixed with the Roman alphabet, signs of what could be called "super-Koreanness" became widespread beginning in the 1970s, such as the "·" (*arae a* 아래 아), a vowel of the Korean alphabet which fell into disuse. As a form of "super-modernity," as analyzed by M. Augé (1992, 138-139), "super-Koreanness" stands as a quotation from cultural identity and historical roots and, like an empty shell, is more the product of acculturation than a reflection of a pre-existing and unalterable Korean specificity. Similar processes, concerning for example the Bretagne's identity and its manifestations during the nineteenth century, have been analyzed in France (Bourdieu 1980; Bertho 1980; Gelézeau and Hancock 1995).

Finally, it must be stressed that the commercialization of the streets of Seoul, bounded with the Romanization of the street markings (signs, shop-fronts, designs), accompanies the modern use of streets. In ancient times, commercial activities were kept outside the city walls, or strictly limited to precise thoroughfares and big markets (Delissen 1992) (see fig. 1).

Augustin Berque emphasized the danger of this accultura-

tion which often accompanies the loss of the specificity of a milieu (Berque 1986, 129). In Seoul, it has not yet reached all quarters. Although the metropolis expresses itself in the CBD and in the commercial poles gained through modernization that occurred by using Western patterns as models; the Korean Seoul still shows up in the quiet lanes of ancient Hanyang.

The Street Market

It is impossible to approach the topic of the specificity of the Korean milieu without saying a few words about Seoul's markets. Furthermore, they are especially interesting since they fully embody our point: in Korea the market does not occupy a public square, but rather one street or a group of streets. Indeed, these markets are permanent, and their presence gives a circulating space back to pedestrians.

At first glance, it is hard to believe that the corridor of the market has ever been a street. The multicolored displays that overflow onto the pavement are covered by canvases which are stretched across the street, recalling the Mediterranean *souks*.

These markets, which have survived from the earliest years, exist everywhere in Seoul, even in the areas where tradition has already largely disappeared. In Gangnam,¹⁸ although post-1970s development from its onset incorporated the vision of a city where the car's function was of utmost importance, some streets in Gangnam are populated with markets and have the same character as the market streets in Gangbuk: overrun with displays that restrict traffic, these streets have become closed and non-circulating spaces for the cars. In this case, a form of trade—which some might consider doomed to eventual extinction—persists.

The market is a true expression of the Korean milieu. Its survival may thus be the sign of one or several essential functions—beyond the simple commercial function—in the public life of a quarter. The concept of centrality, associated in the West with the place where the ways converge (in other words the public square) might be associated in Korea (where urbanistic tradition excludes

public squares) with the street market.

Hanyang's Labyrinth

What is called the labyrinth¹⁹ seems also to be one of forms through which the traditional milieu persists in the metropolis. The lane can present different aspects, but it is always narrow, without a sidewalk, and is abruptly delimited on each side by the walls of the houses. The most typical walls are made of red brick, and are perforated with one or two tiny rectangular apertures latticed by green bars. The clean verticality of the walls (there is seldom a balcony) is balanced by the smoother curves of the roofs: it has been observed how harmoniously they reflect the hills and the pine bows of the far eastern landscape.

A lane in Seoul gives the impression of a closed and protected space, due to the rareness and small size of the apertures in the walls. The lane offers the pedestrian a walk between two blind walls, obeying by this feature the logic of concealment evoked earlier. Also, this points to Korea's deep belonging to the Chinese cultural area: "One can't speak of Chinese cities without speaking of walls" (P. Gourou). The Korean street is characterized by the closed, blind, and mute wall of private houses. Here, the silence can be so thick that it is easy to forget the huge city rumbling around.

Seoul's lanes undergo a large diversity of transformations, among which the most surprising are those that depend on rough site topography. Indeed, Seoul's lanes are seldom flat; a lane is sloping by essence, especially now that the flattest zones have had their network alternated by modernization. On the hills, it often happens that the lane turns into a stair where the slope begins. The consecration of the street as pedestrian space on one side and labyrinth on the other. If elbows, turns, and dead-ends make a labyrinth, the feeling of being in a maze increases when the lane climbs a hill. For then, the bottom is invisible, since sight is blocked by the slope itself.

Thus, Seoul's alleys are, like its markets, vibrant expressions of Hanyang. They are more than the passing traces of a vanishing re-

ality, but a current phenomenon that remains despite the general acculturation of some quarters. This is especially interesting to discover during a walk through Gangnam. The narrowest streets, even equipped with a sidewalk, become pedestrian again. Such examples, although infrequent, are quite revealing. In winter, when the snow floods Gangnam's sidewalks, when the cloudy sky makes the buildings fade away, what reappears is one of the faces of Hanyang.

The Nature and Function of the Street in the Korean Conception of Space

If the urban environment reflects a certain conception of the world, then it should be possible to see this in the structure and features of Korea's cities and streets.

The Street-Landmark in Question

The streets in Seoul have no name: that is the most striking characteristic of Korean streets to the Westerner who is used to the Cartesian rationality of a logical address system, which is so codified that access to a private house is easily gained. In Seoul, on the contrary, only the few large *ro/no* have names, the smaller residential streets do not. As a matter of fact, it is significant to find out, enlightened by surveys carried out in the field, that the mental representation of Seoul contains monuments but no street names.

Indeed, the non-designation of Seoul's streets is not an exception in Eastern cities. In *L'Empire des signes* (The Empire of Signs), Roland Barthes made famous the misadventures of the Westerner trying to find his bearings in Tokyo (Barthes 1984, 47-57). The address exists, however, solely as a mail address,²⁰ practically unusable for anyone but the postman who delivers mail there. The way that leads to a private residence is scattered with obstacles that make it necessary to resort to such expedients as drawing makeshift maps or meeting friends at the closest subway station. These solutions seem intricate and not very rational to a Westerner, who would

probably rather give names to the streets and put numbers on the doors. However, such a system would fit poorly with the Korean mentality. In a culture that promotes the family as the most honored and valued social cell, access to privacy is strictly reserved for those who are bound to the family. Therefore, a rationalized address system is not imperative. Indeed, it may be a way of expressing that the society in question is less attached to individualism and more to the extended family, more respectful of fleeting time and inhabited space than of the necessity of ordering and counting individuals.²¹

*A Cellular Space Protecting the Group*²²

Thus, the street is not a valid landmark in spaces that people conceive as areas rather than as lines. As a matter of fact, their spatial reference is expressed by referring to the fringes of the non-named street rather than to the street itself. In speech, the generic term *geori* (road, street) designates not only a street, but also the quarter it runs along. This assimilation also is an expression of the cellular structure of space in Korea, where protecting the family is preferred to improving circulation. Concretely, the lanes that cause traffic problems in the city assume an important function in a neighborhood, since they screen all the visitors and thus, preserve the privacy of the area. When entering the lane, one crosses the threshold of a territory where everybody knows each other and a stranger to the group instantly attracts attention. In this respect, the lane can be considered as a tool of social control.

The importance conceded to the group is fully justified in a civilization that for many centuries has worked in the paddy-fields. Still, it is only one among the numerous features that makes Korea part and parcel of the “civilization of the plant” (P. Gourou) promoted by Chinese culture. Therefore, the seller of rice holds a specific position in some quarters of Seoul. As the rice stock for the month is usually delivered at home, this merchant is—with the postman—one of the few to know the address of his customers, so that some of them add a real estate agency to their first occupation. The fact

that the rice house (*ssaljip*) turns into a real estate agency (*budong-san*)²³ may be a striking manifestation that this civilization of rice, which has often been depicted as structuring the countryside, is also a structuring agent of urban life.

The Street between the Public and the Private

Conforming to the logic of cellular space that preserves the private domain, the street is strongly separated from the interior of the house, which the passer-by's gaze never enters. The aforementioned blind wall is only one of its manifestations. The action of taking off one's shoes, for example, is part of a rite that establishes the moment of entering into a house through the abandonment of shoes, accessories belonging to the exterior and not to privacy.

But the family is not the only group that carefully protects itself from the exterior world. Social behavior tends to occur in closed places as well. Seoul's coffee shops are specially organized quite differently from their Parisian counterparts, which are opened to the street to such an extent, that sometimes the terrace occupies part of it. In Seoul, coffee shops are located on the ground floor or on the second floor; they are invisible to the passer-by and they steep in a semi-obscurity away from busy streets. Similarly, the public bath, a supremely closed place, assumes an important social function in a neighborhood.

In the same way that the space devoted to the family, the house, is protected, public places also tend to be closed spaces that permit non-family cells to exercise a social life outside the domestic space (in some respects they are metaphors for the domestic space). It seems that public life is practiced only by referring to the archetype of the family and the absence of the public square in Korean urban tradition is probably an expression of that.

Although the street is by essence an open space, that does not necessarily predispose it to be a place of social practices of a public nature—this occurs more often in closed spaces. It is possible, then, to better understand the features of Seoul's markets, whose social function is equivalent to that of the coffee shop or the public

bath, as a non-street. Becoming a space of convergence in the social sphere, it negates itself; it becomes a closed space and loses its primary communicating function.

The alteration of the Korean milieu seems inevitable in a capital adapting to the universal problems of urbanization with more international urban models. But the street landscapes, where modernity and tradition coexist, serve as witnesses to the cultural uniqueness of the Korean city. The hybrid spaces and the traffic problems in Seoul reveal much more than the uneasy modernization of a rapidly expanding metropolis; rather they reveal a general incompatibility between new practices based on the efficiency of circulation and a traditionally cellular milieu promoting the closed residence and the demesne of the family, hidden by the street itself.

Streets and the Transformation of Local Public Spaces in Seoul (1995–2010)

But how does the transformation of forms of housing change everyday practices? Do changes in private domestic spaces have an effect on the use of public spaces? Captured here in eight photographs, the fifteen-year evolution (1995–2010) of an outlying neighborhood of Seoul (Singongdeok-dong in Mapo-gu) illustrates several of the changes that may affect local public spaces, creating everyday changes at the level of the neighborhood or the residential block.

Photographs 1 through 4 were taken in 1996. Photograph 1 presents a designated urban renovation zone below a hill. The residential block to be renovated, in the foreground, consists of a group of houses dating from the 1950s that incorporates a number of early twentieth century architectural norms in design (curved tile roofs, heavy wooden doors, tiny window openings) and structure (L or U layout with an internal courtyard). These single-story homes are connected by a labyrinth or maze of pedestrian alleyways. The heart of the block is exclusively residential, with shops and services (e.g., the dry cleaner in the foreground) relegated to the main thor-

oughfares along the block's periphery, providing a transition with neighboring blocks. In this residential archetype, local public space is supplied by alleyways, which also represents a form of extended private space for the surrounding community.

Taken in this neighborhood between 1996 and 1999, photos 2, 3, and 4 illustrate the twofold use of the alleyway as semi-private space and local public space. It is a place where women meet up to peel zucchini while exchanging news (photo 2), children ride around on tricycles—a sign that traffic is not a danger (photo 3),



Photo 1. Singongdeok-dong renovation district (*jaegaebal guyeok* 再開發區域) in 1996.



Photo 2. The semi-private use of a dead end in Singongdeok-dong's "labyrinth" of alleyways.



Photo 3. Singongdeok-dong in 1996. The alleyway is a playground for children.

and red pepper is even left to dry unattended in autumn (photo 4).

In 2000, this block was reconstructed as a residential complex consisting of ten buildings of between 25 and 28 floors (photo 5).

Here, the renovation zone pictured in photo 1 has been rebuilt by a construction branch of the Samsung conglomerate (*jaebeol* 財閥).



Photo 4. Red peppers dry in an alleyway that appears to be an extension of private space, Singongdeok-dong.



Photo 5. Singondeok-dong renovation district in 2000.

Taken in 2010, photo 6 reveals new and even more profound transformations: the red-roofed buildings of this first renovated block, which dominated under their mass the other rundown neighborhoods earmarked for renovation in 2000, now appear “dwarfed” by the very tall tower blocks constructed at the end of the decade.



Photo 6. Singondeok-dong renovation zone in 2010.

The rundown block in the foreground of photo 5 has here been rebuilt (high rise towers in the foreground).

Although the first residential complex is distinguished from these more recent and luxurious tower blocks in terms of their con-

ception, social content, image and subsidiary of production, the local public spaces respond to the same considerations in the conception of facilities adapted to the needs of resident populations: either purpose-built open spaces, such as children's playgrounds (photo 7), the most recently built of which sometimes include play fountains (photo 8) or closed common spaces, as in elderly care facilities. To this, one may add the various clubs frequented by women residing in the high-rise estates (clubs for sports, traditional dance, music, etc.). The maintenance of traditional practices may sometimes be observed in these new residential complexes. For example, the use of mats and small platforms placed on the edge of a playground where grandmothers sit down to look after their grandchildren. But these practices, tied to the corporeal postures of a "life lived near the ground" in domestic spaces traditionally lacking tall furniture, tend to die off with the individuals who embody them.



Photo 7. Sadang-dong, a classic scene in a high-rise estate: the children's playground.



Photo 8. In Balsan-dong, recently built high-rise estates include fountains and water games, very popular among children in summer.

NOTES

1. “Le tracé des voies ne répond pas seulement à la fonction de circulation. Il exprime une conception du monde” (The layout of roads does not only answer the function of circulation. It expresses a world conception) (see Berque 1982, 121).

2. The word “milieu” is used here as Berque defines it: a mutual relationship between a subject (which can be individual or collective) and its environment and presenting a comprehensive logic (see Berque 1987, 318).

3. See Robin, Shin, and Jeannel (1985, VI-IX).

4. “*Pungsu* (the Chinese *fengshui*) is a tradition still widely practiced in the Far East. In any case, it is a fundamental factor of the Korean mediance (identity of the milieu), not less than the interpreted relief . . .” (Berque 1986, 216).

5. The north-south oriented roads (corresponding to the present Sejongno and Changgyeongguno) were also processional arteries.

6. In the late fourteenth to early fifteenth centuries, Seoul’s population totaled approximately 100,000 inhabitants; the population reached 200,000 inhabitants for the first time in 1669 and this number remained the same until the end of the nineteenth century (see K. Lee 1977, 79-86).

7. Ancient name of Seoul during the Joseon period.

8. “Les rues et les routes (étaient) conçues essentiellement pour le piéton, (si bien que) coudes et détours n’avaient pas grande importance” (Streets and roads [were] essentially conceived for the pedestrian, [so that] bends and curves were not very important) (Berque 1982, 120).

9. According to the reports of Isabella Bishop, it seems that some changes concerning the street network occurred in 1897 under the auspice of Seoul’s then-governor, Ye Cha Yun, but these works of modernization remained modest (see Bishop 1905, 2:255-276).

10. Evolution of Seoul’s population: 1920 (250,000 inhabitants); 1945 (900,000 inhabitants); 1960 (2,450,000 inhabitants); 1970 (5,530,000 inhabitants); 1980 (8,370,000 inhabitants); and 1991 (11,000,000 inhabitants). The average rate of growth during 1960–1970 was 6.5 percent per year (see Lee 1977; Seoul Metropolitan Government 1960–1991).

11. A first basic project on Seoul’s urbanism was published in 1962,

though it was not effectively carried out, in addition to the laws and orders of the Council which multiplied during the decade between 1960 and 1970. The fundamental plan of urbanism was established in 1970. It forecasted the widening of the streets, the construction of parking lots and overpasses at important crossroads, as well as the setting up of a subway line, but it was only partially carried out.

12. The work of modernization was conducted through two main stages in 1967–1970 and 1974–1978.

13. In Korea, streets and roads are officially classified depending on their width and on the number of lanes they have (this classification dates back to the time of the Japanese occupation). According to the official classification of urban administration, Seoul's streets are divided into four categories: *gwangno* 廣路, eight way roads (in fact there is only one boulevard in this group); *daero* 大路, four-to-six way roads (most of them are the boulevards widened several times during the twentieth century); *jungno* 中路, two-to-three way roads that are also paved; and finally, *soro* 小路, streets less than 12 meters wide (see Gelézeau 1990, 38).

14. In 1980, Seoul was already one of the cities whose center suffered most from the clogging caused by the rush of vehicles. According to official estimates, the total amount of registered vehicles in Seoul would reach one million by 2000. However, the million mark had already been reached by 1989 and at present, registration growth is around 20 percent per year (see Gelézeau 1990, 41).

15. *Ro* (or “*no*”), which means “road” or “way” designates the large boulevards of Seoul. Contrary to other streets, they have their own name, to which the morphem “*no*” is added. For example, Sejongno is translated as Sejong boulevard.

16. The use of colors on the facades is strictly regulated in certain streets.

17. *Hangeul* is the term for the Korean alphabet. *Hanja* 漢字 is the term for the Chinese characters still used in Korean writing.

18. As opposed to “Gangbuk” which designates the initial core of Seoul north of the Hangang river, “Gangnam” is the part of the city located south of the Hangang river, which was developed much more recently. In Korean, *gang* means “river,” *buk* means “north,” and *nam* means “south.”

19. The word “labyrinth” (*miro* in Korean) is used by G. Lee (1987, 139-

162) to designate all the primarily pedestrian small streets of Seoul.

20. The address includes, in addition to the name of the ward (*gu* 區) and the name of the quarter (*dong* 洞) a zip code and sometimes a house number, composed of two groups of figures. The first figure refers to the plot the house is located on and the following figure indicates the order in which the house was built on the concerned plot. This address system, already quite intricate, also includes many exceptions.

21. Berque also suggests that such a system corresponds to a more traditional society and that it was indeed the Paris address system until 1729 (see Berque 1982, 125).

22. Berque uses “cellular” (in French, “*aréolaire*”) as opposed to “linear” or “punctual.” “Un espace linéaire s’organiserait par la définition d’un certain nombre de points de repères et par la jonction de ces points en réseau. La circulation y serait privilégiée. Un espace aréolaire s’organiserait au contraire sans repérage préalable. . . . L’habitat y serait privilégié” (A linear space would be organized by the definition of a certain amount of punctual landmarks and by joining these points into a network. Circulation there would be privileged. On the contrary, a cellular space would be organized without preliminary marking. . . . Habitation there would be privileged) (Berque 1982, 118–119).

23. Literally “real estate.” Previously, these real estate agencies could be opened without any qualification, with the only allowance of the quarter administration. Since 1987, it has been made necessary to take an examination to be allowed to practice as a real estate agent. The association between *ssaljip* and *budongsan* is still quite frequent in some quarters of Seoul, but tends to no longer be perpetuated.

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